

BBC NEWS

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Dale Farm traveller evictions 'may breach human rights'

Plans to evict people living illegally at England's largest travellers' site may breach human rights law, a United Nations expert has warned.

Basildon Council has given the 200 people living on 51 unauthorised pitches at Dale Farm, Essex, until the end of August to leave.

The UN's Raquel Rolnik has now called on the UK government to find a peaceful solution to the matter.

The council has said planning law was breached.

'Leave the site'

A Department for Communities and Local Government spokesman said: "The British courts have found that the developments at Dale Farm are in breach of planning law and Basildon District Council is within its rights to evict travellers from the site.

"Anyone living in unauthorised developments at Dale Farm should now respect the decision of the courts and leave the site within the specified period."

More than 400 travellers currently live at the former scrapyard, which is between Billericay and Basildon.

Basildon Council has said that about half of the 100 pitches do not have planning permission and said previously it had carefully considered the circumstances of the site.

Travellers began to set up pitches illegally on the land in 2001.

Ms Rolnik, the UN's special rapporteur on housing, said in a statement that evictions could "constitute a grave breach of human rights if not carried out with full respect for international standards".

'Human rights obligations'

Ms Rolnik and Rita Izak, the UN's independent expert on minority issues, have now called on government ministers to provide "adequate alternative housing for 86 Irish traveller families faced with forced eviction from Dale Farm, Essex, before the end of August".

"We urge the UK authorities to halt the evictions process and to pursue negotiations with the residents until an acceptable agreement for relocation is reached in full conformity with international human rights obligations," said Ms Rolnik.

She said the number facing eviction could include as many as 110 children.

"It is now of utmost importance that the rights of the residents to fair compensation for their lost homes and property and the provision of adequate alternative housing are fully respected," she said.

The UN rights experts said they were sorry that continuing negotiations with the Dale Farm residents to try to find alternative land for the evicted families were abandoned a year ago.

The experts said that "cast aside a valuable opportunity to reach a just and lawful solution to this longstanding dispute".

People living at the site have previously said they were "distressed" at the situation.

Policing the clearance of the site is expected to cost up to £9.5m.